



Leave Those Clippings on the Lawn!

Leaving grass clippings on the lawn to decompose back into the soil is a good way to recycle essential nutrients and water back to the turf. Studies demonstrate that clippings return nearly one-third of the fertilizer applied, as well as small amounts of essential micronutrients; because grass is 70 percent water, leaving clippings as they're cut helps reduce the need for irrigation.

Clippings decompose rapidly and don't contribute to thatch buildup as once believed. While decomposing, they act as a natural mulch, helping to shade grass roots and conserve important soil moisture. Returned clippings provide food for beneficial soil bacteria, which decompose thatch and perform other important functions that help create a healthy turf environment.

The following practices will maximize the benefits of recycling grass clippings:

Mow frequently

Frequent mowing is essential for maintaining a vigorous, healthy turf. As a rule of thumb, turfgrass should be mowed every five to seven days to a height of 2" to 2 1/2". This will avoid the problem of long clippings smothering the underlying grass.

Another important principle involves removing no more than one third of the leaf per mowing. Removing larger amounts shocks and weakens the plants, taking them weeks to recover fully and causing excessive browning.

Other mowing practices

Mow grass when the lawn is dry. Wet grass doesn't cut as cleanly, clogs up under the rotary mower, or forms a wet mat on the lawn itself which is unsightly and requires removal to avoid smothering the turf below. Timing studies also indicate mowing dry grass requires less time than mowing wet grass.

It is also important to keep all types of mowing equipment sharp and in good working condition. Dull, improperly adjusted equipment tugs on the grass crowns, weakening the plant; tearing the grass blades and leaving ragged edges that provide ready access for the invasion of disease and insects. It also destroys the aesthetic appearance of the turf.

Proper fertilization

Fertilizer, particularly nitrogen, has long been recognized for enhancing the color and top growth of turfgrass. Fertilization is also an important part of management to help maintain a dense turf, which is the best prevention against an invasion of weeds.

The quantity and source of nitrogen applied per season has a direct effect on the quantity of clippings generated. To maintain the desired turf color and density without generating excessive clippings, apply no more than one pound of actual nitrogen per 100 square feet of lawn area in each of three applications - preferably in September, May, and July.

To calculate the amount of a particular fertilizer that will provide one pound of actual nitrogen, divide the percent nitrogen listed on the bag into 100. For example, a 15-5-10 fertilizer contains 15% nitrogen.

Fifteen into 100 equals 6.6, therefore, apply 6.6 (rounded off to 6.5) pounds of this fertilizer per 1000 square feet. Twice as much, or 13 pounds, would be required to provide two pounds of nitrogen per 1000 square feet.

Use nitrogen sources with “slow release” characteristics whenever possible. These formulations release their nitrogen to the turf in a slower, more uniform fashion than conventional nitrogen sources. When accompanied by suggested mowing practices, this uniform release helps avoid excessive clippings and the need for bagging.

Using low-growing (dwarf) grasses

Everyone dreams of a lawn that reduces the time and expense of mowing, watering and fertilizing. For years turf breeders have been working with a class of grasses called *hard fescues* to produce dwarf, low-growing varieties to fulfill those dreams. A few of these new grasses, growing only half as tall as standard varieties, are now available in our region. Ask for them at your local garden center.

Original fact sheet by John Roberts, UNH Cooperative Extension Turf specialist; updated 5/00

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